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## Seth, God of confusion; a study of his rule in Egyptian mythology and religion.

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

1967

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Velde, H. T. (1967). *Seth, God of confusion; a study of his rule in Egyptian mythology and religion*. Martinus Nijhoff/Brill.

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## CHAPTER ONE

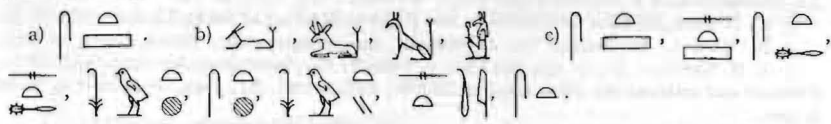
### THE NAME AND THE ANIMAL OF SETH

#### I. THE NAME OF SETH

Many different forms of the name of Seth occur in the Egyptian texts.<sup>1)</sup> In the texts of the pyramids, except in the Unas pyramid, it is written: *štš*.<sup>a)</sup> In the Unas pyramid the name is written only with the so-called Seth-animal, lying down.

Afterwards also, the name may be written with the Seth-animal alone, lying down or seated or with a seated god with the head of the Seth-animal.<sup>b)</sup> These signs may be supplemented or replaced as in the Pyramid texts by one-letter signs, not always the same ones. The first letter is usually *š*, less often *s*. Whenever the *š* or *s* is written, the *t* is written also. Other signs show more variation. Often combined with one of the usual determinatives of gods or one of the different forms of the Seth-animal as a more special determinative the various spellings are as follows: *štš*; *stš*; *šth*; *sth*; *š(w)th*; *sth*; *š(w)t(y)*; *st(y)*; *št*.<sup>c)</sup>

In the course of the history of Egyptian language and script, *š*, *h* and *h* sometimes prove interchangeable.<sup>2)</sup> In group-writing *šw* stands for *š* and *ty* for *t*.<sup>3)</sup> Therefore it seems certain that these are all various spellings of the same name. There is no convincing reason to translate *št* and *š(w)t(y)* with "it" and "he".<sup>4)</sup> Since the



1) A survey of the various ways of writing the name Seth in hieroglyphs, employing the textual material gathered for the Berlin dictionary was given by G. Roeder, *Der Name und das Tier des Gottes Set*, ZÄS 50 (1912), p. 84-86. See also CT V, 337a.

2) G. Lefebvre, S. Sauneron, *Grammaire de l'égyptien classique*, Le Caire, 1955<sup>2</sup>, § 40. An Egyptian word meaning "saliva" may be written as *nšš*, *nšh* or *nšh* (WB II, 342, 314, 319). See further: J. Vergote, *Phonétique historique de l'égyptien*, Louvain, 1945, p. 64 sqq.

3) A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, London, 1957<sup>2</sup>, p. 482; A. Erman, *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, Leipzig, 1933<sup>2</sup>, § 29. For practical reasons the transcription *š(w)* and *t(y)* is maintained.

4) So P. E. Newberry, *The cult-animal of Set, Klío*. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte 12 (1912), p. 397.

writing  $st(y)$  also appears<sup>1)</sup>,  $\dot{s}(w)t(y)$  seems indeed to be group-writing and not to be derived from the name of the locality  $\dot{s}w$ .<sup>2)</sup>

The suggested distinction between an Egyptian god Seth and a non-Egyptian god Sutekh, supposed to have been absorbed into Seth,<sup>3)</sup> has now been abandoned.<sup>4)</sup> The group-writings<sup>5)</sup>  $\dot{s}(w)t(y)$   $\dot{s}(w)th$  are interesting. Although not only loan-words but also real Egyptian words were written in group-writing,<sup>6)</sup> it was yet mainly foreign words and names that were so written. As in iconography the exotic character of Seth sometimes was brought out,<sup>7)</sup> so the inclination may also have existed to accentuate it in the script of his name. Since the M.K. the script  $\dot{s}(w)t(y)$  comes into use beside the traditional form  $\dot{s}t\dot{s}$ , and since the 19th dynasty also the script  $\dot{s}(w)th$ .<sup>8)</sup>

It may be concluded from the writing  $\dot{s}(w)t(y)$  beside  $\dot{s}t\dot{s}$  and  $\dot{s}(w)th$  that the final consonant had become weakened. This may have been so especially in Upper Egypt: in Coptic, Bohairic retains the  $\text{Ⲥ}$  while Upper-Egyptian Sahidic reduces the original  $\dot{s}$  or  $h$  to  $\text{Ⲅ}$ .<sup>9)</sup>

According to the Berlin dictionary<sup>10)</sup> the Babylonian rendering of the name was  $\dot{s}utah$ . In cuneiform writing  $s$  and  $\dot{s}$  may interchange and the Egyptian personal name  $\dot{s}(w)t(y)$  was pronounced as Suta.<sup>11)</sup> The vowel  $\bar{e}$  may have evolved from  $\bar{u}$ .<sup>12)</sup> It is not known however when the  $\bar{u}$  passed into  $\bar{e}$ . The Greek renderings of Egyptian royal names from the 19th dynasty composed with the name Seth do not show the  $\bar{u}$ . Just as the way of writing is not uniform but has

1) CT V, 337a.

2) So V. Loret, *Le dieu Seth et le roi Séthosis*, PSBA 28 (1906), p. 128, and P. Montet, *Les constructions et le tombeau d'Osorkon II à Tanis*, Paris, 1947, p. 20.

3) H. P. Blok, *De beide volksverhalen van papyrus Harris 500 verso*, Leiden, 1925, p. 57.

4) H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin, 1952, p. 705.

5) A. H. Gardiner, *EG*, p. 593 and § 60; A. Scharff, *Die Ausbreitung des Osiriskultes in der Frühzeit und während des Alten Reiches*, SBAW, Philos.-hist. Kl., Jhrg. 1947/Hft 4, p. 44 n. 100.

6) W. A. Ward, *Notes on Egyptian group-writing*, JNES 16 (1957), p. 198 sqq.

7) Cf. Chapter V.

8) Cf. the article by G. Roeder mentioned in the first note of this chapter.

9) B. Gunn and A. H. Gardiner, *New rendering of Egyptian texts. 2 The expulsion of the Hyksos*, JEA 5 (1918), p. 44 n. 1.

10) WB IV, 345.

11) E. Edel, *Neue keilschriftliche Umschreibungen ägyptischer Namen aus den Boğazköytexten*, JNES 7 (1948), p. 19 sqq.

12) W. F. Albright, *The vocalization of the Egyptian syllabic orthography*, New Haven, 1934, § 29; B. H. Stricker, *Trois études de phonétique et de morphologie coptes*, AcOr 15 (1937), p. 1-20; J. Vergote, *Où en est la vocalisation de l'égyptien?*, BIFAO 58 (1959), p. 1-19.



variants, the pronunciation will also have been different according to time and place. The harder Lower-Egyptian pronunciation may have been Sūtekh evolved to Sētekh; the Upper-Egyptian pronunciation may have been Sūt, evolved to Sēt. The h in the modern rendering of the name Seth might be reminiscent of the Coptic ϣ. It seems practical to maintain in this book the long established rendering that follows the Greek: Seth.

## 2. THE MEANING OF THE NAME SETH

The explanations of the name given in the 19th century under the influence of the famous theory that religion and belief in gods arose from language and a disease of language are now out-dated; indeed they were never valid since at that time the letter š was still read as a determinative.<sup>1)</sup> The meaning of the name Seth is uncertain by modern etymological standards.<sup>2)</sup> For the historian of religion, however, pseudo-etymological explanations of the believers themselves are certainly no less valuable than the etymological derivation. They may have influenced the religious conceptions, and may represent them.

Apparently the explanation given by Plutarch is not his own invention, but goes back to Egyptian tradition. He writes<sup>3)</sup>: "And the name 'Seth' by which they call Typhon denotes this: it means 'the overmastering' and 'overpowering' and it means in very many instances 'turning back' and again 'overpassing'." According to Kees<sup>4)</sup> this pseudo-etymology derives from late Egyptian interpretations and goes back to an Egyptian word that means "verwirren, zerstückeln." He seems to be referring particularly to Plutarch's first sense of "overmastering" and "over-

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d)  was confused with .

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1) E. Meyer, *Set-Typhon*, Leipzig, 1875, p. 1 sqq.; H. Brugsch, *Religion und Mythologie der alten Aegypter*, Leipzig, 1885-1888, p. 702 sqq.

2) G. Roeder in: *Roscher's Ausführliches Lexikon*, vol. IV, col. 727, H. Kees in: *PW II*, col. 1897; A. Scharff, *o.c.*, p. 44 n. 100.

3) Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* c. 49; cf. F. C. Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia V*, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1957, p. 120 sq.

4) H. Kees in: *PW II*, col. 1897.

powering" and the Egyptian words *thth* e) <sup>1)</sup> or *tštš* e) <sup>2)</sup> or *tšš* e) and *tš* e) <sup>3)</sup>. Thus Kees suggests that the Egyptian etymologists reduced the name *Štš* or *Šth* to a verb preceded by an *š*. The *š* prefixed to a verb usually has a causative value, but sometimes it may confer the force of a declaration or an estimation.<sup>4)</sup>

There are two instances of punning with the name of Seth that I know of, and there may be more. These show that the Egyptians themselves were acquainted with this pseudo-etymology, and applied it. The first is of a late period and comes from Denderah: "I have cut *išš* (meaning Seth, as is evident from the determinative) into pieces (*tštš.n.i išš*)." <sup>5)</sup> The second is older and comes from the Coffin texts: "I have cut the gang of Seth into pieces (*tšš.n.i smšwet Štš*)." <sup>6)</sup> In the Coffin text Seth is not written with alphabetic signs but with the ideogram of the Seth-animal, just as in the example from Denderah the spelling of Seth's name avoids the traditional letters in which one would recognise the verb concerned. Apparently there was a reluctance to ascribe the ominous force of this word to Seth. His essential being is unriddled, but on no account must he be paid homage as "Zerstückeler" and so on. The play of words, or rather of letters, is purposely broken up. We cannot enter into a further discussion here of the interesting subject of play upon letters and words.<sup>7)</sup> The Egyptians will not have paused to consider the truth of this etymology according to our Western standards. The etymology had to be theologically tenable and true. The unriddling of the name must also unriddle the essence. The



1) WB V, 328, 8 sqq.

2) WB V, 330, 5 sqq.

3) WB V, 329, 17 sqq.

4) Cf. B. H. Stricker, *De lijkpapyrus van Sensoos*, OMRO NR 23 (1924), p. 44 n. 1.

5) A. Mariette, *Dendérah, description générale du grand temple*, Paris, 1873, 1V, pl. 80.

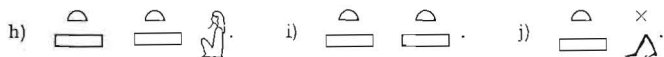
6) CT VI, 213 i.

7) On this subject, cf. S. Morenz, *Wortspiele in Ägypten*. In: *Festschrift Johannes Jahn*, zum XXII. November MCMLVII, Leipzig, 1957, p. 23-32.

Egyptian theologian will have acknowledged the etymology of the name Seth as instigator of confusion, oppressor or "Zerstückeler" as true, because this explanation agreed with the mythical function of Seth.

Osiris, Seth's victim, is sometimes called *tštš* <sup>h)</sup>. Allen translates: "the dismembered one".<sup>1)</sup> One may suppose there is some connection between the motive of the "Zerstückelung" in the myth of Osiris and the pseudo-etymology of the name Seth, but it is hard to say which arose from which. Generally speaking, it may be said that punning has fostered the formation and elaboration of myths in Egypt (see the article of Morenz referred to above). G. Daressy subscribes to the views of the Egyptian pseudo-etymologists, and declares that *tštš* is an apposition: "ce serait 'celui qui a fait la division, le morcellement' d'Osiris." <sup>2)</sup> We shall see below that Egyptian representations show there was a close relation between the Seth-animal and the griffin. The name of a griffin with an animal body, wings and a falcon's head, is *tštš* <sup>i)</sup>. Leibovitch has translated this name as: "celui qui déchire, qui met en pièces." <sup>3)</sup>

Our quotation from Plutarch shows that at least two pseudo-etymologies were current, for he also gives "turning back" and "overpassing." The letters *tš* do indeed offer more than one possibility. *Tšš* or *tš* is also "frontier." Although Seth will appear further on as lord of foreign countries and frontier-god, I do not know of any Egyptian speculations that could directly support what Plutarch calls "overpassing." There is a verb "*tšš*" <sup>i)</sup> that means "to desert", or something similar, that is: "turning back." Hayes has carefully examined the meanings of this verb: "In the numerous contexts in which it occurs *tšš* nearly always means "to desert," "to abandon," "to be missing" when duty, loyalty or some other obligation, demands one's presence." <sup>4)</sup> This seems to be what the writers of Coffin texts founded their speculations on. The name Seth is often







1) T. G. Allen, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Documents in the Oriental Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 1960, p. 69, 284.

2) G. Daressy, *Seth et son animal*, BIFAO 13 (1916), p. 86.

3) J. Leibovitch, *Le griffon I*, BIE 25 (1943), p. 188 and fig. 5.

4) W. C. Hayes, *A papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum*, New York, 1955, p. 48.

replaced in the Coffin texts by the  sign,<sup>1)</sup> which can be translated as "to separate." By writing Seth with the  sign, one could avoid confirming Seth in writing as the instigator of confusion, the "Zerstückeler" and so on, and it was also unnecessary to draw the mysterious Seth-animal, which the scribes of the Pyramid texts already avoided, except in the pyramid of Unas. This  sign merely characterised him as the one apart, the cause of separation, the deserter. When this writing with the  sign fell into disuse, the Egyptians still had the word *tš'i* to characterise Seth: "He who is pleased with desertion (*tš'*) and hates friendship."<sup>2)</sup>

These pseudo-etymologies are not confined to the writing *Štš'*, but could also be applied to *š(w)th*. Beside *tš'tš'*<sup>3)</sup> there is *thth*,<sup>4)</sup> and beside *tšw* (Ausgewanderte) there is *wthw* (Flüchtlinge).<sup>5)</sup>

From M. A. Murray we learn of a no less interesting pseudo-etymology than those transmitted by Plutarch, but one that is entirely bound up with *sth*. She writes:<sup>6)</sup> "As the name begins with S, one is inclined to suspect a causative as in the name of the crocodile god Se-bek, 'He who causes to be pregnant'. Se-tekh would then mean 'to intoxicate, to cause to be drunken', and would imply a cult of the same type as that of Bacchus, where drunkenness was regarded as possession by the god." She is clearly thinking of the verb *th* <sup>k</sup> (to be drunk). Her explanation is obviously only acceptable as a possible rendering of Egyptian priestly speculation, and not as a modern scientific etymology.

According to a papyrus in Leiden,<sup>7)</sup> a sick person may be cured by giving him a great deal of beer to drink, for then the demons who are tormenting the patient become fuddled. Seth is represented as the intoxicating power of the beer:

k)  .

1) A. H. Gardiner, *EG*, Sign-list Aa 21.

2) *Urk.* VI, 7, 15.

3) *WB* V, 330, 5 sqq.

4) *WB* V, 328, 8 sqq.

5) *WB* V, 329, 14.

6) M. A. Murray, *The splendour that was Egypt*, London, 1949, p. 131.

7) *Pap. Leiden* I 348, rt. 13, 4; cf. J. Zandee, *Seth als Sturmgott*, *ZAS* 90 (1963), p. 148.

"Seth will be irrestrainable, when he wishes to conquer the heart in this his name of beer (*ḥnkt*).

He confuses the heart to conquer the heart of the enemy, the evildoer, the male and female dead person."

Although here again the author has not written down the pun, in this case *sth—th*, he may well have had it in mind. It is significant, that Seth's name is given as "beer."

As to the bacchanalia assumed by Murray, we can only say that according to Yoyotte<sup>1)</sup> Seth and Hathor, the well-known goddess of drunkenness and love, were tutelary god and goddess of wine. There is no means of showing, however, that the Egyptian who left us a stela on which Seth and Hathor are depicted together,<sup>2)</sup> was a participant in such Egyptian bacchanalia. A wine-offering is sometimes made to Seth<sup>3)</sup> and wine from the Kharga oasis is a gift of Seth.<sup>4)</sup> According to the dream papyrus, a craving for drink is characteristic of the Sethian type. Of such a man it is said: "If he drinks beer, he drinks [it so as to engender strife (?) and] turmoil." <sup>5)</sup>

To sum up, the Egyptians seem to have attached the following three meanings to the name of Seth: instigator of confusion, deserter, drunkard. As remarked above, the *ś* prefixed to a verb has a wider meaning than the causative. It is not impossible, that to the mind of Egyptian intellectuals the striking characteristic of Seth given by J. Sainte Fare Garnot<sup>6)</sup> was in part already contained in his name, and so touched his essence: "Grand amateur de femmes, bien qu'il ait en même temps des mœurs invouables, toujours prêt à la bagarre et point ennemi du chantage, il apparaît comme la personnification de la violence et de la mauvaise foi."

### 3. THE EARLIEST KNOWN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SETH-ANIMAL

It is assumed that an ivory animal figure, found at Mahasna, is the earliest representation of the Seth-animal we know up to the

1) *Knaurs Lexikon der ägyptischen Kultur* von G. Posener in Zusammenarbeit mit S. Sauneron und J. Yoyotte, München-Zürich, 1960, s.v. Wein.

2) W. M. F. Petrie and J. E. Quibell, *Naqada and Ballas*, London, 1896, pl. XLIII, 3.

3) P. Montet, *La stèle de l'ân 400 retrouvée*, *Kémi* 4 (1931-1933), p. 191 sqq., pl. XI.

4) *Edfou I*, 469.

5) *Pap. Beatty III*, rt. 11, 6, cf. 10; A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, 3rd. Series, London, 1935, Text volume, p. 20.

6) J. Sainte Fare Garnot, *La vie religieuse dans l'ancienne Egypte*, Paris, 1948, p. 22.